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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000396

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CUBANS APPLAUD BUSH REMARKS

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11. (C) Summary: On Wednesday, May 21, ninety-five Cubans watched the live broadcast from the White House commemorating Cuban Solidarity Day at the invitation of USINT. Everyone who spoke to USINT staff had high praise for the President's speech, remarking that it reflected a firm commitment to the Cuban people. Most of the 127 individuals who had signed up for the event came, despite a relentless media campaign that accused USINT employees of serving as conduits for funds from a Miami-based charity with ties to alleged terrorist Luis Posada Carriles. On their way into the PAO residence, where the event was held, dissidents had to run a gauntlet of cameras and reporters from Cuban state media and Telesur, who had set up just outside the gates and across the street. The President's speech garnered enthusiastic applause at several junctures, but the high point may have been when invitees sang along with famed Cuban-American musician Willy Chirino, whose 1980s anthem "Ya vienen llegando" (Here They Come) continues to strike an emotional chord with activist audiences. End Summary

12. (C) On Wednesday, May 21, USINT hosted some 95 Cubans at the PAO residence to watch a live broadcast of the ceremonies for the first annual "Cuban Solidarity Day" at the White House. TV Marti had arranged for coverage of the festivities on TV Azteca, the Miami-based channel (38) that carries TV Marti newscasts on the DirectTV satellite. Most of the 127 individuals who had signed up for the event came, despite an ongoing media campaign that accused USINT employees of delivering funds to dissidents from a Miami-based charity owned by a convicted arms trafficker (Santiago Alvarez) with ties to alleged terrorist Luis Posada Carriles.

13. (C) In attendance were some of the most prominent members of the opposition, including Martha Beatriz Roque (MBR), Vladimiro Roca, Jorge Luis Garcia Perez ("Antunez"), Roberto de Miranda, Elizardo Sanchez, Francisco Chaviano, and "Ladies in White" (Damas de Blanco) leaders Laura Pollan and Berta de los Angeles Soler. Several individuals specifically told USINT staff that they wanted to show that they were not intimidated by the government's attempts to discredit USINT and the members of the opposition.

13. (C) On their way into and out of the PAO residence, many dissidents were required to run a gauntlet of cameras and

reporters from Cuban state television and the Venezuela-based network Telesur, who had set up just outside the gates and across the street. According to Damas spokeswoman Laura Pollan, the reporters kept asking "very provocative questions." MBR, the target of many of the ongoing attacks from the GOC and official media, refused to answer questions, and strongly rebuked a female reporter from Telesur who had gently placed her hand on her arm: "Don't touch me!" Francisco Chaviano said that he was asked how much money he was paid to attend the event. His reaction: During his more than 13 years of imprisonment, he had suffered terribly for refusing to wear a prisoner's uniform. To suggest that he would do something he did not believe in now just for money was on its face absurd. For her part, Berta Soler loudly told the press that the Damas were a peaceful and non-political organization, and that the real terrorists are Raul and Fidel Castro, who have blood on their hands. Soler attended the event despite the fact that her husband, Angel Moya Acosta, one of the 75 dissidents jailed in a massive crackdown in 2003, was recently transferred to a hospital and underwent surgery on May 16. Soler has been granted the right to stay with her husband in the hospital during his recovery. Despite the risks of losing this privilege, Soler told Pol/off that she wanted to show that she could not be intimidated by the GOC's propaganda campaign.

¶4. (C) All Cubans we asked pronounced the President's speech excellent. Several said that his commitment to the Cuban people was obviously very firm, and that the speech captured the present Cuban reality by contrasting continued severe repression with the slow trickle of government reforms that had little impact on the lives of average Cubans. MBR and

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others gave the "thumbs-up" sign when the President announced that people would be allowed to send cell phones to Cuba in order to promote family contact.

¶5. (C) The night before, on May 20, Cuban state television devoted the second of their nightly "Mesa Redonda" newscasts to allegations against the opposition community and USINT. As evidence, the program presented intercepted telephone conversations and other communications by MBR in which she made disparaging comments about other members of the opposition, including Rene Gomez Manzano, Felix Bonne, and Elsa Morejon, wife of political prisoner Oscar Biscet. With the exception of Manzano, who refused to greet MBR, the others warmly embraced her and had their photographs taken with her as a gesture of unity.

¶6. (C) The President's speech garnered loud, sustained and enthusiastic applause at several junctures, but the high point may have been when USINT invitees sang along with famed Cuban-American musician Willy Chirino on his 1980s anthem "Ya vienen llegando" (Here They Come) -- a song that continues to strike an emotional chord with activist audiences. Chirino concluded with "Pa'alante," a song from his latest album that was due to have been released by Sony on May 20. The boisterous crowd again came to attention when Chirino's wife and backup vocalist Lissette Alvarez sang the Cuban national anthem.

¶7. (C) Comment: Post was pleased to have drawn such a large crowd at a time when the GOC is clearly trying to intimidate the most prominent opposition leaders -- and especially MBR. We believe it is nothing short of remarkable that so many members of Cuban society would attend a USINT event in the face of a fierce media campaign to discredit both members of civil society and USINT officials. Invitees defiantly faced down hostile reporters who stuck cameras and microphones in their faces, reacted enthusiastically to a speech by the President of the United States, and sang the Cuban national anthem along with members of the exile community in Washington like the true patriots they are.

WILLIAMS